

Report

Fire Island National Seashore

■ 1.0 Site Description

Fire Island National Seashore, is a thin New York island stretching for 32 miles along Long Island's south shore. It forms a barrier between Long Island's Great South Bay and the Atlantic Ocean. The island encompasses a state park, a county park, the National Seashore, multiple communities and a seven-mile expanse of federal wilderness area (Otis Pike Wilderness Area), the only wilderness area in New York state. The Seashore consists of ocean beaches, dunes, and maritime forests. Other attractions as part of the Seashore include the Fire Island Lighthouse (see Figure 1), the Sunken Forest (a 200-year-old holly forest), and, on Long Island, the William Floyd Estate, the original home of one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. Visitor Centers are located at Sailors Haven, Watch Hill, the south end of the William Floyd Parkway (Wilderness Visitor Center), the Fire Island Lighthouse, and at the Ocean Beach Contact Station. Each Visitor Center provides maps and information and includes a bookstore.

Located approximately one hour east of New York City, Fire Island is a popular ocean beach recreation area. Additional activities at the Seashore include sightseeing, hiking, and wildlife viewing on nature trails and along the seashore. Camping is allowed at Watch Hill and in the Otis Pike Wilderness Area. Canoeing, boating and fishing take place in Great South Bay, along salt marshes, and between Watch Hill and Smith Point. Interpretive programs are offered at all sites, depending upon the season. A map of the Seashore is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Map of Fire Island National Seashore



There are five principal visitor use areas on the Seashore. These include:

1. **The Fire Island Lighthouse** (see Figure 2) – Includes exhibits, nature trail, and interpretive programs;
2. **Sailors Haven** – Includes a Visitor Center, boardwalk nature trail through the Sunken Forest, bathhouses, marina, and seasonally lifeguarded ocean beach;
3. **Watch Hill** – Includes nature trail, Visitor Center, ranger office, lifeguarded beach and park campground;
4. **Fire Island Wilderness Visitor Center and foot access to Otis Pike Wilderness Area** – Includes visitor contact station, nature trail, and ocean beach; and
5. **William Floyd Estate** – Guided house tours and other interpretive programs.

Figure 2. Fire Island Lighthouse



The operating season for the Sailors Haven and Watch Hill units is generally from May 15 through October 15. The Fire Island Lighthouse, William Floyd Estate and the Fire Island Visitor Center are accessible year-round but operating hours vary by season.

Because the use of motor vehicles is restricted on the Island, 90 percent of all visitors access the Island by boat, either ferries or private boats. It is also possible to drive over bridges to parking lots at either end of the Island and then walk to the Seashore areas. In terms of annual visitation, there are approximately four million recreational visits to the

federally managed portions of Fire Island and approximately 2.5 million additional visits to the state park areas. Almost all visitation to the Seashore is during the summer although the NPS wishes to encourage greater use of the facilities during non-summer off-peak months. In large part, the Seashore is perceived predominantly as a beach although there are other valuable resources which can be utilized during the off-peak season.

■ 2.0 Existing ATS

As indicated above, use of motor vehicles on Fire Island is restricted. As a result, all visitors to the Seashore must arrive via private boat, ferry, or by walking from parking areas at either end of the Island. All Fire Island sites can be reached by private boat in the Great South Bay, with marinas at Watch Hill, Sailors Haven and most island communities. Also, because the Bay is shallow, boaters occasionally moor offshore near park sites. There are no paved roads on Fire Island, and ferries only take foot passengers. There are no bike paths, and bicycles are not recommended for use on the island. Driving on island is restricted to year-round residents and workers only during the off-peak season. Permits are limited to 80 for workers contracted to work on island and 125 residents. Those with vehicles must drive either on sidewalks or on the beaches during certain regulated periods. Otherwise, the primary means of transportation to destinations on island are the ferry services.

In addition to various private ferry services, there are three NPS concessionaires which provide ferry service to the Seashore. The Davis Park Ferry Company provides ferry service from Patchogue, Long Island to Davis Park and Watch Hill. The Fire Island Ferry Company provides service between Sayville and Sailor's Haven, Cherry Grove, and Fire Island Pines. The Sayville Ferry Company provides service from Bay Shore, Long Island to Kismet, Saltaire, Fair Harbor, Atlantique, Dunewood, Ocean Beach, Seaview, and Ocean Bay Park. These ferries provide regularly scheduled service during the summer peak season but service is limited during the off-peak season. The trip to Fire Island via ferry takes approximately 30 minutes. On Long Island, all three mainland villages adjacent to Fire Island are serviced by the Long Island Railroad. At Patchogue, the Watch Hill Ferry terminal is within a two block walk of the train station.

■ 3.0 ATS Needs

Fire Island National Seashore represents a particularly unique situation relevant to transportation needs given its high visitation and lack of access via conventional transportation services. All access to the Seashore is either by boat, private or ferry, or by foot from parking areas at either end of the island. As indicated above, auto use on the island is prohibited during the summer when visitation is highest and is then allowed only under restricted conditions during the off-peak season when ferry operations are reduced. Although this would appear to indicate a need for improved transportation services, particularly alternative transportation services which would minimize impacts on the

Island's fragile resources, local residents on the Island have traditionally opposed proposals for new services and infrastructure.

The NPS staff at the Seashore believe that implementation of alternative transportation services can help facilitate access to the Island's resources and support the needs of year-round residents, renters, as well as day visitors. Specifically, the NPS staff has identified the following as potential Alternative Transportation Systems (ATS) improvements:

1. **Enhanced Ferry Services** – The majority of park visitors and year-round residents depend upon the various ferry services for access to the Island during the summer. Ferry service is expensive, with an adult round-trip fare of \$11 in addition to a parking fee of \$10 per day. These fees are beyond the means of many potential Seashore visitors, and are not competitive with the cost of the on-island parking lots of \$8.00 per day. The NPS staff believe that there is a need for an examination of ferry fare policy, particularly during the off-peak season when the ferry cost could be perceived as exorbitant to access the Island for nature walks without use of the beach. Furthermore, the NPS believes that more ferry service could be provided to and from more dock sites on both Long Island and Fire Island and be coordinated with an improved facilities for visitor reception. As a specific example, the General Management Plan identified a need for service between Heckscher State Park and Sailors Haven. Finally, ferry service is perceived as unreliable during the off-peak season and subject to a cycle of reduced demand and reduced services, further limiting off-peak season visitation to the Seashore.
2. **Additional Marinas** – The NPS operates two marinas within the Seashore and others are privately operated outside of the Seashore. The NPS staff indicated that the NPS marina facilities are used to capacity during the summer peak (although there is sufficient capacity during the off-peak) and that this has potential to restrict access during busier periods. While it would be difficult to expand the existing marinas, additional facilities could be developed at other sites.
3. **Bike Facilities** – There is currently no infrastructure on the Island which could facilitate bicycle access from the parking areas or between the various island communities. A bike path and supporting infrastructure could provide an alternative to foot transportation to the Seashore's various destinations while minimizing potential for environmental impacts.
4. **Lighthouse Shuttle** – The Fire Island Lighthouse has approximately 75,000 annual visitors. Currently the only means of access is by foot from the Robert Moses State Park parking area although the NPS believes that many visitors would like to be able to drive the approximately one-quarter mile from the state park to the lighthouse. A shuttle bus operated from the state park parking area to the lighthouse could help meet this need, particularly during the spring and fall when school groups visit the site.
5. **Signage** – Although not considered an ATS need, there are currently no signs on the New York state highways providing information on the various means of access to Fire Island. The NPS indicates that local, county, and state authorities have restricted signage to the Seashore despite requests that better signage be erected.

The Seashore's NPS has indicated that an overall study of access and on-island circulation is desirable to address the park's various transportation needs and to help develop a consensus with Island residents and communities.

■ 4.0 Basis of ATS Needs

There are three markets for transportation services on Fire Island according to the NPS staff: 1) year-round residents; 2) seasonal renters; and, 3) day visitors. Each of these groups has individual needs which do not appear to be adequately addressed by existing transportation services either to Fire Island or on the island itself. Furthermore, there appears to be a significant lack of consensus regarding what additional or enhanced services, if any, should be provided in the future. The NPS has developed a draft funding request to study improvements to the ferry services currently serving the island. Enhanced ferry service could improve overall accessibility from the mainland and Long Island but would not necessarily improve mobility on the Island and within the Seashore area. Given the range of issues, the apparent lack of consensus over new services, and the range of opportunities, it appears that a comprehensive study of Fire Island National Seashore transportation needs, involving the various Fire Island constituents is an appropriate first step in addressing ATS needs. According to the draft NPS proposal to study enhanced ferry operations:

“No systematic transportation planning has been done to date. [Transportation] systems were developed over time and by private companies [but] have not been adapted to increased population, train routes, new highways, or changing visitation demands. Continually increasing population and visitation demands are placing strains on the system and increasing demand to build more roads and parking lots as alternatives to ferries....The State of New York is currently spending billions of dollars to improve the bridges to Fire Island with completion expected in 2012. The Long Island Railroad is about to begin its first expansion in 20 years [to develop] new routes into Grand Central Terminal... and routes to JFK and LaGuardia airports. This is an excellent opportunity for the NPS to develop an integrated transportation plan to Fire Island that will mesh with the developing State and regional systems and [minimize] the need for construction of more paved areas on the barrier island.”

■ 5.0 Persons Interviewed

Constantine Dillon, Superintendent, Fire Island National Seashore

Sam Lawton, Facilities Manager, Fire Island National Seashore